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Madeline Wells

Washington University in St. Louis

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INTO THE FOLD: DELEUZE, DESIRE, AND ART

Maddie Wells
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to understand how I, as a visual artist, understand and utilize the fold. I will trace the many ways in which a fold functions, oscillating between my own practice and those of other contemporary artists, including Orlan and Shana Moulton. From twentieth century baroque to spiritual cleansing, theatrical staging to suggestive metonymy, the fold invites the *desire* to transform—for something more than what the everyday offers. Through photography, video, or sculpture, we have the ability to express an expanded, more accurate understanding of the real and the virtual, the human and the nonhuman. For theoretical support I look to the theories of Gilles Deleuze, Leibniz, and Graham Harman.

BFA THESIS

With Hegel, it was easy: we had Spirit (*Geist*). A metaphysical substance flowed through us and there were we were: making paintings, building nations. The future would be formed with or without us; our monuments expressed the World Historical Spirit or they did not—we did not know, but time would tell. Alexander the Great, Picasso, the bourgeoisie! Pure, dialectical movement carried us with it like a Frankenthaler painting: “two shapes of consciousness that have not yet accomplished the movement of absolute abstraction.” She was confident that every turn of the brush would find its way into the composition. We’ve gotten it inside out, upside down, cried Marx. You’re only touching the surface! Materialism does not *begin* with abstraction. “We set out from real, active men,” not abstract shapes of consciousness (Marx 656). We are always already between

(*inter*) matter. History does not create itself; workers of the world, unite! But by the 1990s, everyone had forgotten Hegel, and Marx and Althusser too. Ideology is a dream, after all. Relax, play, rearrange, create our own surplus value. Difference, *differance*, *differance*, sighed Derrida. Did we need a revolution after all? A young French man named Nicolas Bourriaud read Marx and found a small place between the pages that had been overlooked. “The interstices of the ancient world”—before and without capital. Maybe art did not need to start a revolution, but only an *interstice*.

Geist, glitch, rupture, revolution, rollover minutes, interstice, intervene, surplus, schizophrenia, detour, desire, *differance*, lines of flight, leftovers: we have many names for the same—other, more than—thing—it all depends on where you stand, where you live. The best one for our times might be *fold*. Deleuze is our guide: “the infinite fold separates or moves between matter and soul, the façade and the closed room, the outside and the inside. Because it is a virtuality that never stops dividing itself, the line of inflection is actualized in the soul but realized in matter, each on its own side” (Deleuze 35).

What is interesting about the concept? The implications of a fold are never-ending (always unfolding). I will limit myself to a specific fold: the fold in art.

How do we apply this concept? Where do we find the fold in art? First and foremost, folding is a *technique*. The purpose of this essay is to understand how I, as a visual artist, understand and utilize the fold. I will trace the many ways in which a fold functions, oscillating between my own practice and those of other artists, from twentieth century baroque to spiritual cleansing, from theatrical staging to suggestive metonymy. Always at play is the *desire* to transform—for something more than what the everyday offers:

through photography, video, or sculpture, we have the ability to express an expanded, more accurate understanding of the real and the virtual, the human and the nonhuman (especially in the digital age). It is a desire that is deeply embedded in the material world. But the movement is at once abstract and concrete: Leibniz, who invented the fold, also invented calculus. Art invented form and she invented content. Art has the capacity not only to express something of the infinite, but also to seize infinitude and create a better (more beautiful, more interesting) world: “The world must be placed in the subject in order that the subject can be for the world. This is the torsion that constitutes the fold of the world and of the soul” (Deleuze 26).

For my short video, *Into the Fold*, I use a blonde wig puppet as a stand in for the back of a human head as viewed on a train or a bus (I employ a similar technique by covering my face with a brunette wig in *The Right To Be Lazy*). Subtitles give voice to the wig’s desire: she wants to go on vacation, to go “into the fold.” The curtain opens and we are taken on a trip, moving through train footage of a trip through Italian cities and towns. By the end of the video, the curtain closes and the wig collapses, deflating back into her original form.

Like the wig, we are always already in the fold—but we can only take the movement one step at a time. Leibniz reminds us that “a soul can read in itself only



Figure 1: Maddie Wells, Still from *Into the Fold* (2015)

what is there represented distinctly. It cannot all at once open up all its folds, because they extend to infinity” (Leibniz 25).



Figure 2: Orlan, *Saint ORLAN with Crown and Falling Flowers*, 63 x 47, color photography, 1983

The baroque invented the fold, Deleuze reminds us. This is why Orlan folds. She is a contemporary folder par excellence. In her series, *The Draped-the Baroque* (1980), layers of white fabric form a quasi-dress—more Rubens than ready-to-wear, a miniature diamond crown sits on her head, and bouquets of fabric peak out from in between. A cloudy, painted sky forms the backdrop and never meets the ground. What is beyond her dress?

A garden, a forest? The folds draw us in. With her gesture, her countenance, she evokes a queen or a goddess for an unknown mythology. Orlan utilizes an old trick from the baroque. “The effect of contrast, of drapery, of the deliberate bending and distortion of space was to create a dramatic illusion that suggests the existence of the unseen. Drapery foils the eyes natural curiosity, leading the viewer to imagine that it covers something” (Norman 18-19). In another series, *Shifting Folds* (2012) Orlan removes the figure and centers on the fold itself. By abstracting she does not do away with matter, she only shifts perspective: “abstraction is

not a negation of form: it posits form as folded, existing only as a ‘mental landscape’ in the soul or in the mind, in upper altitudes; hence it also includes immaterial folds.

Material matter makes up the bottom, but folded forms are styles or manners. We go from matter to manner; from earth and ground to habits and salons, from the *Texturologie* to the *Logologie*” (Deleuze 35).

What are we to make of Orlan’s plastic surgery, ‘the Reincarnation of St. Orlan’? What is the effect of seeing a body that is recognizably human transformed with the chin of Boticelli, the eyes of Diana, and the forehead of Mona Lisa? “Through the surgical performance of medical technologies, Orlan is able to reclaim her body from gendered cultural stereotypes. The subsequent cyborg body that she creates transgresses the boundaries between the normalized discourse of plastic surgery and the abject” (Garoian and Gaudelius 342). In her manifesto, “Carnal Art,” Orlan renounces the divide between the heavenly and the bodily: “Carnal Art transforms the body into language, reversing the biblical idea of the word made flesh; the flesh is made word” (Orlan.eu). That she delights in the aesthetic of the baroque is no surprise. John Rupert Martin tells us that the Baroque created a Copernican revolution in art, as it expressed the “principle of coextensive space” for the first time—dissolving the barrier between the real and the fictive (Martin 14-15).



Like Orlan, I am compelled

Figure 3: Maddie Wells, Still from *The Right to Be Lazy* (2015)

by the power of art to evoke—

if not realize—bodily and spiritual transformations. If Orlan can become a living painting, then can a painting become a person? Or, better yet, can a person become a chair? My two-part sculpture, *The Right To Be Lazy*, represents this wish through the disassembled carcass of a La-Z-Boy chair and a looped video played on a television. In the video I wear a shirt constructed from the skin of the La-Z-Boy chair (its cushions) and an unfolding heap of off-white pleather fabric. I arrived at the form of the outfit through imitating a reclining woman in a classical painting. The title comes from the 1883 manifesto, *The Right To Be Lazy*, by Paul LaFargue, son-in-law of Marx himself. At the beginning of the third chapter he laments the unfulfilled promise of the industrial era by invoking ancient Greek poet, Antiparos, who

sang of the invention of the water-mill (for grinding grain), which was to free the slave women and bring back the Golden Age: “Spare the arm which turns the mill, O, millers, and sleep peacefully. Let the cock warn you in vain that day is breaking. Demeter has imposed upon the nymphs the labor of the slaves, and behold them leaping merrily over the wheel, and behold the axle tree, shaken, turning with it's spokes and making the heavy rolling stone revolve. Let us live the life of our fathers, and let us rejoice in idleness over the gifts that the goddess grants us.” Alas! The leisure, which the pagan poet announced, has not come. The blind, perverse and murderous passion for work transforms the liberating machine into an instrument for the enslavement of free men. Its productiveness impoverishes them. (LaFargue)

And the passion for work impoverishes impoverishes language and art too. Instead of leisure, art, a stab at the sublime, we have the anthem of ‘work hard, play hard.’ To reject this gross state of affairs we must sink deeper into its upholstered crevices. Become a chair, a couch potato, a lazy bum! Conjure new desires from inside the chair while your body slumps in television comatose. Make the Rubenesque from the abject, discarded, the form that has given up. The Baroque and the Sublime are not so distant, after all.

That we have lost faith in a Hegelian Spirit should not produce an entirely tragic state of affairs. Certainly, without the capital m ‘master’ the question of being appears uneasily smooth: the hierarchical points collapse into two small mounds, an anarchical, flattened plane, all lower-case letters in the desertification of the planet and of history. Post-modernism announced the death of the master; post-humanism announced the death of the subject. In a recent essay in *e-Flux*, Melissa Gronlund joins the funereal chorus, identifying in contemporary moving image work a “substrate of anxiety and domestic disruption” (Gronlund). To cope with the “daunting, ongoing questions prompted by current technological shifts,” artists like Shana Moulton, Mark Leckey, Ryan Trecartin/Lizzie Fitch, Ed Atkins, and Laure Provost have returned to the Gothic (Gronlund). She argues that “a preoccupation with the Gothic tropes of the uncanny, the undead, and intrusions into the home show how notions of the individual, the family, and the domestic are in fact being newly contested” (Gronlund). In place of the fleshy form, she finds the cadaverous and hollowed out. She quotes an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist where Atkins explains that, “the cadavers became the best way to look at representation and, in particular, recent technologies of representation” (Gronlund).

While Gronlund is right to identify traces of the Gothic in Atkins’ morose CGI dramas, she is far less convincing in her analysis of Moulton’s humorous low tech videos like *Restless Leg Syndrome* (2012): “Although this particular work does not employ the macabre style one associates with the Gothic, the pot is familiar: strange features born out of technology appear in the bedroom of a young woman, lying alone” (Gronlund). The strange features she refers to are the multiplying legs that appear in the video’s finale,

which is set to a euphoric Enya soundtrack. The effect, though mildly unsettling, does not



Figure 4: Still from Shana Moulton, *Still from Restless Legs Syndrome* (2012)

echo “Victorian panic around the entrance of germs into the home” (Gronlund). Moulton’s alter ego takes the pill from the television

commercial she sees on TV. She is not a passive

victim but an active, desiring subject. The uncannily fulfilled dream for a cure for RLS does not condemn so much as it celebrates the infomercial metaphors: where Gronlund sees failure I see an *unfolding*: not a cadaverous form but multiplying legs. Moulton may be tapping into a collective fear or anxiety, but in restaging those feelings she creates a kind of Freudian pleasure.

Restaging in the ‘post-human era’, though proceeding from an awareness of technological domination and material irrelevance, does not give up on life. The anthropocene redefines the physical world in light of manmade destruction (death), but also in terms of manmade progress (movement). To represent human life through virtual (CGI) or metonymic means (a mattress, a refrigerator) is to find ourselves on vacation at the Great Pacific Garbage Patch—the environment and man, one continuous mass of longing and waste. Such an understanding requires displacing a human-centered idea of representation with an object-centered one. The move to the object, of course, is as old as Duchamp (if not older). More recent artists such as Sarah Lucas, Bjarne Melgaard, Koki

Tanaka, Mark Leckey, merely accelerate the movement the Dadaists and assemblagists began. Moreover, a new mode of thought called ‘object-oriented philosophy,’ championed by Graham Harman, finally provides the textual framework for these artistic investigations. Playing catch-up, Harman asks:

Why this obsession with *mind*-independence in the first place, and especially with independence from the *human* mind? Rocks, trees, and stars have other destinies besides haunting knowledge as a dark residue ungraspable by human categories. If such entities are real, then they must be real not just apart from us, but apart from each other as well. (Harman 56)

Leckey and Lucas both answer this question and present an infinite fold. Leckey’s *Green Screen Refrigerator* (2010) brings the refrigerator out of the kitchen and gives it voice; Lucas’s *Au Naturel 1994 Mattress* uses a water bucket, melons, oranges and cucumber to stand in for a person. Both make a joke about an age-old joke about the human condition by rhyming the inanimate with animate, the banal with the sacred. And since there is relief in laughter they create a momentary escape: a fold.

What does the reliance on the absurd, animate object tell us about our times? If not a statement of gothic tragedy, then what—a call to action? Or, rather, can it be not only a reflection, but also an inflection for another kind of movement? In my most recent



Figure 1: Maddie Wells, Still from *Ode to Anne Carson* (2015)

video, *Ode to Anne Carson*, I re-interpret the Greek conception of women as liquid, porous, and therefore weak and irrational. The script, inspired by Anne Carson’s essay on this topic, “Putting Her in Her

Place: Woman, Dirt and Desire,” draws out the broader implications of what it means to *be* liquid. In a mash-up of YouTube self-help and Harman’s object-oriented philosophy, a young woman coyly announces, “My vessel has no lid.” At the end, we are asked to “Leak, slip, slip, slip, sip away,” to drink (as human) and decompose (as plant, object, element). The combination of the virtual and material offers, perhaps, a new social subjectivity, a new way of being-in-the-world. Deleuze asks, tantalizingly, “Finally, in order that the virtual can be incarnated or effectuated, is something needed other than this actualization in the soul? Is a realization in matter also required, because the folds of this matter might happen to reduplicate the soul?” (Deleuze 26).

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